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ABSTRACT

There are benefits to be gained by integrating social cognition research with communication research, especially with regard to the effects of television viewing on child development. Social cognition brings innovative theoretical and methodological approaches to the field of communication, permits a more complete characterization of the child in any communication situation, and facilitates the discovery of developmental processes underlying children's perceptions of television. Some possible research strategies for studying the central organizing principles of a young child's social knowledge in the context of television viewing include (1) using multiple methodological strategies to explore expectations; (2) identifying the stability of response, consistency in use, and spontaneity in appearance of children's organizational principles; (3) examining children's knowledge on any issue or concept across different domains and contexts; and (4) studying the child's social world (social knowledge) in realistic settings across time (maturational case studies). The relatively few communication studies that have used social cognitive models have explored the development of the child's ability to perceive intent, to distinguish between intended and accidental actions, to process persuasive messages, to understand television characters, and to process scripts (to organize world knowledge). (RL)

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# The Application of Social Development Theory to Research on Television and Children

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# The Application of Social Development Theory to Research on Television and Children

The communication process can be broken down into conceptual areas which receive much attention from within such other disciplines as sociology, psychology, political science, and business. The theories derived from these fields can inform and direct much of what is studied in communication. Frequently, however, research in communication tends to ignore the thinking in other fields and proceed with no supplemental insight to the main theme at hand--communication. This often leads to models which have a limited capacity to explain and predict phenomena or outcomes. At a more concrete level, it leads to fewer testable hypotheses within individual studies in a field where empirical research accounts for most of the contributions to the field's development. Finally, without the direction of a theoretical framework, the interpretation of results must remain more study-specific than generalizable to a larger theoretical model. While the number of interesting variables may continue to grow, the number of theoretical linkages between variables remain few.

The point of this brief critique of much of the mainstream research in communication is to set the stage for a contrast. I believe that the current work in children and television represents an important exception to the more "ethnocentric" trends I have described. Not always, and not always consistently, but often, the work in children and television can

be seen as work which tries to integrate the lessons and insights from other disciplines and build toward a general model which captures the child as viewer.

Initially, Piagetian models of child development were used to help investigate and explain children's understanding of television (cf Roberts, 1973; Wartella, 1980). Different stages of cognitive development predicted differing abilities to deal with the attentional, perceptual, and logical operations inherent in TV viewing. This work has been valuable in drawing attention to the way in which children relate to the television medium, irrespective of specific televised content. It moved the primary emphasis away from locating behavioral effects of the medium (e.g. violent TV shows lead to violent acts) and placed it on the information-processing capabilities of the child. Of course, the way in which information is processed can have behavioral consequences, but these behavioral effects are explained or predicted by an understanding of the child's abilities generally, the child's ability to comprehend television as a medium, and finally, the nature of the televised content.

The idea of merging social development theory, or more specifically, social cognition theory, with work in communication and children can be seen as a spin-off from the successful application of cognitive development theory to communication research. That the use of social cognition theories in communication research followed cognitive development theories is probably a reflection of the relatively young life of social cognition within psychology itself. It is only within the last

fifteen years that the development of social cognition in children (children's understanding of the social world) has been studied (Shantz, 1975; Flavell, 1977) Prior to this time, only studies of social behavior were conducted, guided by psychoanalytic theory or social learning theory.

As cognitive development theories achieved greater acceptance within psychology, and as a certain level of competence was achieved in the construction of appropriate methods for testing developmental constructs, researchers began to transfer some of their developmental stage models from the non-social world to the world of people and relationships. Many of the early models of role-taking (marking the developmental course from viewing others from an egocentric perspective to the ability to fully understand the role of another person) show great similarities to Piagetian theory (Shantz, 1975; Flavell, 1977). Flavell (1977) provides a nice summary of some of the parallels which exist between the development of social and nonsocial cognition. Looking at recent work in social cognition, it is clear that social cognition definitely has a theoretic identity of its own.

"Social cognition means the cognition of human objects and their doings. It includes perception, thinking and knowledge regarding the self, other people, social relations, social organizations and institutions in general, our human social world" (p. 49, Flavell, 1977). According to Shantz (1975), social cognition encompasses the study of how people conceptualize others; specifically, how they come to understand

the thoughts, emotions, intentions, and viewpoints of others.

The study of social cognition is important for two reasons: 1) through the study of social development a more thorough picture is drawn of the child's development generally through different age periods; and 2) the way the child sees others has an effect on the child's social behavior with others (Shantz, 1975). The second point is of special interest to communication scholars as they attempt to characterize the developing child's responses to television, with the assumption that what the child gets out of TV in the interpretations he or she makes or what he or she understands will have an impact on subsequent behavior.

The primary research areas involved in social cognition are: what the other sees; what the other feels; what the other thinks; what the other intends; and what the other is like (Shantz, 1975). These are areas of clear relevance to an understanding of the way a child processes information from television. One of the immediate and compelling appeals in applying knowledge of social development to television research is that the topical overlap is so great. Television is mainly about people and their relationships with others, albeit as they are represented in the medium of TV. The learning which takes place from television is largely about the social behavior of people. To understand TV drama one must have an understanding of the feelings, thoughts, and intentions of the characters one sees.

Besides the overlap in key concerns, and the similarity of underlying theoretic goals and assumptions, models of social cognition fit well with the emerging models of communication

where participants in communication events are considered in terms of what they uniquely bring to the event--the "what they know" and "where they've been" factors. No single communication event is assumed to affect every individual, or to affect groups of individuals in exactly the same way. On the other hand, cultural homogeneity speaks against the opposite condition --where every individual is seen as so unique or different as to make generalizations at least at the group level impossible. The movement in communication research toward specification of effects (cf. McLeod & Reeves, 1980) is quite compatible with the search for organizing principles of social behavior within the developing child. The different stages of development locate one source of specification where systematic differences among children, and between children and adults can be observed.

Another point of similarity between social cognition models and current thinking in communication lies in the fact that both consider the child to be an active participant in any interaction with the environment. Earlier models of social learning theory interpreted the child as passive, gradually accumulating enough life experiences (motivated by the perception of rewards) to form a set of patterned and stable responses. Maccoby (1980) points out that the research on imitation could have been interpreted as showing the child as cognitively active, selecting out certain aspects of behavior to imitate. This, however, did not happen. Instead socialization was seen to take place along the same lines of the hypodermic needle model of communication. Social

cognition theory today rejects this characterization, substituting it instead with a view of the child actively structuring the environment and acting upon incoming stimuli in order to assimilate it into coherent cognitive categories. The "active receiver" models of communication support this same general idea (Cf : Roberts, 1971).

From research studies in social development, communication researchers can derive hypotheses about relevant developmental characteristics and apply them to the case of television. Television-influenced outcomes may be differentially predicted by the stage or level of some dimension of social development. Communication scholars stand to benefit in two ways by including social cognition models in their work. First, by testing well-documented findings from social cognition within the medium of television, we can learn more about how children deal with the medium qua medium. Most social cognition studies are conducted using verbal presentations. By testing the same hypotheses in a different medium, one can compare the results looking for evidence of systematic medium effects. Secondly, different predictions from social cognition can be applied at the level of specific programming to learn more about the effect that different television content has on the way information is processed. For example, one might be concerned with different inferential processes across different programs varying according to the degree of realism portrayed.

A great deal of basic research is still called for, and is ongoing, in the field of social cognition alone, not considering

the additional complication involved in accounting for developmental processes in the context of a symbolic medium. Process-oriented research is essential for the discovery of underlying mechanisms. Some idea of how the development of social cognition proceeds and is squared with the overt behavior manifested by the child in social situations is needed, and as of yet is sorely lacking (Damon, 1977). The implication of these research "holes" for the communication researcher is that any effort to merge the two fields means an acceptance that process-oriented research will need to be conducted which tries to inform the social cognitive process as well as the process by which the child orients him/herself to TV. The hopeful side of this lies in the expectation that in the future communication scholars will be able to rely on fairly well-documented stages or sequences of social behavior which can be introduced as more or less "fixed" factors into their work. Then it would be possible to look to variance models to locate differences within similar developmental groups along other important dimensions, such as differences in the media used to accomodate certain needs, and so on.

Some research strategies which Damon (1977) lists as essential to the establishment of central organizing principles of a young child's social knowledge can be usefully summarized here for they represent important critieria for any researcher dealing with children.

--Organizing principles are not always apparent from every statement the child makes. Therefore, one needs to combine prior hunches about what to expect with multiple methodological strategies.

--Three attributes of organizational principles must be sought, and identified: stability of the response, consistency in use, and spontaneity in appearance and reappearance.

--One must search for a method which represents what children know. This requires a full sample of children's knowledge on any issue or concept across different domains and contexts. One must examine the hypothetical verbal response as well as the behavior in the real life context.

--One must investigate the social world of the child on its own terms.

--One must ask if we are studying the same thing across time, i.e. as the child ages.

--The method must engage children in interesting and realistic tasks.

--The method must test the limits of the child's social knowledge.

While communication researchers stand to benefit greatly from research in social cognition, there are a number of cautionary points. One is the need to follow careful research principles such as those listed above. Other critical concerns that should be kept in mind is that in many ways social cognition is an area in a state of flux. The growth in social cogntive theory is accompanied by the usual inner-field controversies characteristic of any field which is undergoing rapid identity changes. Thus, whatever theories or mini-theories are current at any given time may be threatened by competing theories or ideas next month. Communication scholars would err if they believe that once a model is adopted there is an unwavering stability about that model. For example, Damon (1977) criticizes much work in social cognition for ignoring the relational viewpoint. He claims that most of the research conducted is limited to identifying and enumerating characteristics of persons and institutions, but does not address the relations between the persons and institutions, or persons with other persons. Furthermore, the transactions which serve to regulate, maintain, and transform these relations are not included in the research inquiry. Damon argues that the "person perception" approach is only a very small part of understanding social relations, and that it may obscure more than it enlightens. Depending upon what the communication researcher is hoping to discover if she/he were to use the person perception approach, she/he may end up with an interesting heuristic, but less of an explanatory model than hoped for.

Just as it is important to stay on top of the theoretic controversies which penetrate a field, it is also important for the communication researcher to have a solid understanding of the theoretic rationale behind relatively stable models of social cognition. Sometimes the concepts seem so intuitively obvious, and their application to communication so straightforward that one adopts one model with little hesitation. This, however, can lead to an oversimplification of the model, causing some of the essential characteristics to be lost, and losing also the ability to make critical distinctions. Finding that there are stages or levels in social development which correspond to certain age groupings, the researcher may be prone to accept age as indicative of stage or level differences without including some independent or confirmatory tests of the development. Age should not be the only independent social development variable measured. By assuming age as a surrogate measure for stage or level, we limit our insights into the social cognitive process as it operates in the communication environment, and risk making erroneous conclusions. It is important to realize fully what constitutes each level or stage and to think of chronological age as a useful shorthand, but not a theoretic variable.

Methodological differences are found to produce significant discrepancies in research outcomes in social development. While findings may be consistent within one type of research design, the introduction of a different methodology may reverse or at least fail to replicate the original findings. For example, in trying to assess children's role-taking abilities, DeVries (1970)

used children's behavioral responses while playing a game as the outcome measure. Under these conditions, 5-year-olds were capable of assuming a role. Selman (1971), on the other hand, using a method which relied on asking questions directly of the child, found little role-taking ability among 5-year-olds (reported in Shantz, 1975). Given that different methodologies frequently elicit different responses which could lead to different conclusions, it is imperative for all who enter the field to be critically aware of the inconsistencies, and to evaluate the methods in conjunction with the concepts being explored.

The communication researcher must take a critical approach when she or he considers adopting a social developmental model. The research must be evaluated against a standard which includes the general requirements of reliability and validity, a standard that includes methodological considerations germane to research on the developmental characteristics of children, and finally, a standard which includes a consideration of the special characteristics of the communication environment.

Regardless of the model of social cognition adopted for the purposes of informing research into communication and children, it is important that this model be put in the context of what we already know from other studies on communication and children. Social development theories can supplement communication research, but from past studies we know that certain other variables are important which are not necessarily candidate variables from social cognition. We should look to social

cognition variables not only for their intrinsic value, but also for their use in clarifying or demonstrating spuriousness among other communication variables. Interaction effects between variables from social cognition and communication may be identified. We should not ignore the substantial research tradition which has been established in the area of communication and children; instead we should look to expand or clarify the base already built.

The number of communication studies which have used social cognitive models or explanations is relatively small; likewise, there are few social cognition studies to use communication variables. I will now describe a few of these research examples.

One area in social cognition research focuses on the development of the ability to perceive "intent". The literature on the effects of television violence on children shows that the perception of intentionality is an important mediating variable in the relationship between the violent television stimulus and overt behavioral displays of aggression (cf. Comstock et al, 1978). Although the studies on which this conclusion is based did not follow an explicit model of social cognition, other related studies can help develop a picture of how and when children perceive intentionality, what difference this perception makes on their evaluation of the characters and the situation, and how this might relate to subsequent behavior. Even though the answers may not be forthcoming immediately, the inclusion of social cognitive constructs in future research may clarify the process underlying this effect.

Work in social cognition has examined the age at which children are able to distinguish between intended and accidental actions and to associate these actions with positive, neutral, or negative consequences. Generally, children by age 6 are able to distinguish between intended and accidental actions regardless of whether the consequences are good, neutral, or negative. If, however, the consequences are extremely bad, there is a tendency to focus more on the consequences; whether the action was intended or accidental is not germane (Shantz, 1975).

Drawing from a group of studies where all actions were purposeful, and noting that the studies relied mainly upon the child's responces to stories, Shantz (1975) reports that children as young as 6 years of age distinguish between good and bad intentions when the consequences are positive but do not make that distinction when the consequences are negative. By the time children are 8 or 9, blame judgments are made consistently on the basis of intention (Shantz, 1975).

Chandler, Greenspan, & Barenboim (1973) tried to replicate these findings with a change in the methodology. They used the typical story format in one condition, and introduced a second condition which involved presenting the basic plot-line on videotape. Significant differences were found between the two groups: children in the story condition responded by placing blame based on the severity of the consequences, whereas children who saw the videotaped version responded on the basis of the actor's intentions.

It is hard to know exactly how to interpret these

differences. Shantz (1975) calls for an analysis of the informational content in the two presentation modes looking at the amount and type of information presented in each. The manner in which the intent or consequence is portrayed may also make a difference in how children respond. With more limited attentional and memory capacities, a particularly dramatic presentation of either an intent or consequence may distract the child sufficiently so that s/he "loses" the other part of the story.

The research evidence is mixed on the question of perception of intent and the evaluation of intent given different sets of consequences, indicating that no adequate model has yet evolved. There may be a number of contingent conditions which affect the child's response. It is clear from this example that while communication research can be guided or evaluated in the light of corresponding social cognitive theories, social cognition also stands to be enlightened. The contribution from communication may come from the use of a medium like film or videotape which, to the social cognitive researcher, may constitute an important methodological variation. It is also possible that communication variables may intervene significantly within social developmental processes.

Roberts, Bachen, and Christenson (1979) have applied a "social perspective taking" model proposed by Selman and Damon (1975) to a discussion of children's ability to process persuasive information from television commercials. Social perspective taking is the "ability to consider another's point of

view as both distinct from and yet related to and somehow contingent on one's own viewpoint" (Mead, 1934). The researchers claim that unless the child is able to understand that there is an "other", and understand that the "other" in a commercial is an external source with an intent to sell a product, the child will not be able to understand fully the purpose of a commercial, and will not be able to engage in any defense strategy against the persuasiveness of the commercial.

According to the Selman and Damon model, there are four levels or stages through which children progress developmentally in social perspective taking. Using the characteristics which differentiate each stage, Roberts et al make predictions as to the child's ability to deal with persuasive messages in the form of TV commercials. They hypothesize that until the child reaches Level 1 (around age 6) s/he will not be able to see the self's perspective as separate and unique from the perspective of the advertiser. Furthermore, until Level 1 is reached, the child bases most of her/his assessments of the other on overt actions, not the inferred thoughts, feelings, and intentions of the other. Roberts et al continue their analysis and hypothesis generation through each of the subsequent stages of social perspective taking predicting different levels of response complexity to advertising at each level.

Any conclusions drawn from the researchers' application of the Selman and Damon model to children's actual processing abilities would be premature. The model was used to generate testable hypotheses backed by a theoretic rationale and some

empirical data. As such, it offered a refreshing alternative to many of the empirical approaches to the study of children and advertising in the communication field.

In an actual test of this model, we would expect to find a medium effect operating here as in the previous example. It is possible to think of television commercials as a type of training study. In training studies, an intervention is designed to address specifically one aspect of social or cognitive development, and "train" the child to move more consistently and/or more quickly through a developmental stage. Since TV commercials constitute such familiar and predictable stimuli, and being so often accompanied by critical comments from parents or other family members, this might push children to a more advanced level of perspective taking.

A series of studies which represent the most deliberate attempt to use social cognition research to study communication behavior is reflected in research on children's understanding of television characters (Reeves & Greenberg, 1977; Reeves & Lometti, 1978; Wartella & Alexander, 1978; Reeves, 1979). In a comprehensive chapter on the subject, Reeves (1979) synthesizes the research on children's perceptions of TV characters and research on children's attraction to TV characters, putting these two areas in the context of the person perception literature in social cognition. He finds that children use a different set of attributes when they describe and differentiate between TV characters than when they describe real-life people. Furthermore, the age and sex differences among children which

appear in the person perception studies using real people as targets fail to turn up as significant differences when children describe TV characters. When children choose role models from a set of television characters, both age and sex figure in as important variables.

Reeves offers some plausible explanations for the discrepancy between children's responses to real-life versus television characters. First, he notes that the methodologies used to elicit the person perception attributes are different in each case. Secondly, Reeves suggests that children may be developing a conception of television and television characters simultaneously but independently from other types of person perception growth, and the results of the studies reflect this medium-specific conception. Television characters inhabit a dramatic world which is typically less complex and more stylized than the real world. Children may perceive that fewer and simpler evaluations adequately describe the characters they see; descriptions of real people, on the other hand, must be more complex and extensive.

Reeves (1979) makes a persuasive case for the continued use of social cognitive theories in television research, pointing out that where the communication literature and the social development literature diverge in their findings, insight may be gained as to the developmental processes underlying children's perception of television as a medium. He suggests that a developmental theory of how children perceive television may be a necessary mediating variable between general theories of

development and children's learning from specific elements of television content.

A final approach to social cognition which may interest the communication researcher comes from a formulation set out by Abelson (1976) and developed further by Schank & Abelson (1977) called "script processing" or simply, "scripts". A script is defined as a "coherent sequence of events expected by the individual, involving him either as participant or observer" (Abelson, 1976, p. 33). Each event which forms a part of the script is represented by an image and a conceptualization--a picture with a caption. This representation in the language of scripts is called a vignette. Scripts can be at varying levels of generality, ranging from the fairly specific "episodic" level to the more abstract "categorical" level. Scripts are developed based on either the immediate (direct) or mediated experiences of individuals. They are used as a way to organize events, and can function to explain past or present events or predict future events.

While most of the empirical research in scripts is conducted with adults, there is a growing interest in studying script development in children. Nelson (1978) has found that preschoolers are aware of the sequential structure of familiar events and that they rely on that structure to help pattern their responses. She also finds that children's scripts develop according to a well-organized hierarchical process where, first, central events are connected, then other recurrent events are added to the structure. Irrelevant or idiosyncratic details are

omitted.

Collins and Wellman (1980) provide some empirical data on the function of scripts in television viewing. They provide a fairly extensive rationale for the influence of scripts on the comprehension of televised narratives in part based on a earlier study by Newcomb and Collins (1979). Initially they set out two predictions concerning age-related differences in the link between scripts and TV viewing: 1) preschool and early elementary school viewers will know fewer and less varied scripts than older viewers, and 2) younger children will be less flexible than older viewers in applying scripts to comprehend new experiences. The researchers find the younger children rely on stereotyped scripts of common action sequences to fill in the gaps caused by their incomplete comprehension of the actual program. Younger children also are more likely to recall aspects of the dramatic portrayals that fit their extant social scripts.

Collins and Wellman's analysis provides an excellent introduction to the use of scripts in television research. Many interesting questions remain; some relating to script processing with different types of television content, others relating to the operation of scripts developed through mediated versus direct experience.

In summary, the benefits to be gained by integrating research from social cognition with communication research are many and significant, though much of this assessment is based less on actual achievements to date than a realization of what is

possible. Social cognition brings both innovative theoretical and methodological approaches to the field of communication. It allows for a more complete characterization of the child in any communication situation, and also facilitates the discovery of developmental processes underlying children's perceptions of television.

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